The Talent of Agency:

A Practical Guide to Growing Real Self-Direction, Resilience, and Responsibility

Glenn Burgos

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Why This Book Now?

The age-old debate over free will and determinism has long divided philosophers, scientists, and the public. On one side are the determinists, who argue that every action is the inevitable result of prior causes—biology, environment, or chance—leaving little room for freedom or moral responsibility. On the other side stand the libertarians, who insist that we must possess some kind of uncaused freedom in order to be morally accountable. But both camps often leave people unsatisfied. Determinism feels too fatalistic. Libertarianism too magical.

And yet, in daily life, we hold people accountable. We teach children to choose better. We believe people can grow, change, and learn from their mistakes. These beliefs are not illusions—they reflect something real about human nature. But what exactly is that something? And how can we explain it in a way that is both scientifically honest and morally useful?

This book is an answer to that question.

The Problem

The modern world faces challenges that demand a more nuanced understanding of human behavior. Our legal systems struggle to determine culpability in light of mental illness, trauma, or developmental immaturity. Our educational systems debate the balance between structure and freedom—whether to emphasize standardized testing and strict curricula, or to allow more autonomy through project-based learning and student-led inquiry. Our political discourse is increasingly polarized between individual blame and structural determinism. We need a framework that accounts for both causation and choice, both constraint and possibility.

The Gap

Traditional compatibilist theories—those that try to reconcile free will with determinism—often fall short because they define freedom in abstract or minimal terms: freedom is just

doing what you want, or acting without external coercion. But this thin view doesn't capture what we really care about when we talk about responsibility, growth, or change.

What's missing is a model of agency as a **trainable capacity**—a model that explains how people actually learn to make better choices, develop character, and earn trust.

The Proposal

Feedback Compatibilism offers that model. It begins with a simple but powerful insight: agency is a **talent**, much like musical ability or athletic skill. Like any talent, it grows through practice and feedback, and it can deteriorate if neglected. By agency, we mean the ability to make decisions, regulate behavior, and influence outcomes in a way that is shaped by effort, experience, and reflection. It can be strengthened or weakened, supported or suppressed., supported or suppressed. It depends not only on biology and environment, but also on experience, effort, and feedback.

Rather than rejecting causality, Feedback Compatibilism embraces it. But it insists that certain types of causation—especially those involving learning, reflection, and adaptation—give rise to new levels of complexity and responsibility. In this view, freedom isn't the absence of cause. It's the presence of **constructive feedback loops**—processes in which actions lead to outcomes that provide useful information for adjusting future behavior. These loops shape our ability to regulate ourselves—such as controlling impulses or managing emotions—plan ahead by anticipating outcomes, and act with purpose toward chosen goals.

The Audience

This book is written for readers who care about both moral clarity and scientific rigor. It is for students of philosophy, psychology, education, law, and public policy. It is for teachers, therapists, parents, and anyone who has ever wondered how we change, grow, or fall apart. And it is for those who find themselves caught between the extremes of blaming individuals or blaming systems—those looking for a third way.

The Road Ahead

The chapters that follow explore agency from multiple angles—what it is, how it develops, how it falters, and how it can be restored. Each chapter draws from both empirical research and lived experience, offering examples that are both relatable and conceptually rich. Along the way, we will examine responsibility, justice, meaning, and identity, always returning to the central theme: that agency is not a given, but a **practice**—one that must be cultivated across a lifetime.

If we understand agency this way, we gain a new way to think about freedom, not as an illusion to be debunked, but as a capacity to be developed. And with that understanding comes new hope—for individuals, for communities, and for society as a whole.

This book is an invitation to actively cultivate the talent of agency—in yourself and in others.

Introduction: Why Agency Matters

Imagine Lila, a teenage soccer player, sidelined by a severe knee injury. Her dreams of playing professionally seem lost, her days filled with pain and frustration. Yet, with her coach's guidance, she commits to daily physical therapy, rebuilding her strength step by step. A year later, Lila scores the winning goal in a championship, her sense of accomplishment radiant. Or consider **Kwame**, a community leader in Ghana, rallying his village to rebuild a school destroyed by a flood, transforming grief into action (Pretty et al., 2003). Or picture **Emma**, a nurse battling burnout during a grueling hospital shift, who learns mindfulness to regain her focus and compassion. These stories don't show people breaking reality's rules or acting without reason—they reveal **agency**, your ability to shape your life's path, like steering a boat through a river's currents, a potential you grow through effort and support.

Why Free Will Still Matters

Free will matters because it defines our sense of self. Are we free to choose our actions, or are we bound by forces we can't control? **Determinism** argues that every move—Lila's recovery, Kwame's leadership, Emma's resilience—is the inevitable result of prior causes: biology, upbringing, even the laws of nature. Yet, this perspective feels constricting, flattening life into a predictable sequence.

Many find its reasoning unconvincing. When asked why we hold someone accountable for a crime, determinists say, "Society's norms require it," and when questioned about those norms, they answer, "They're caused by earlier events." This circular explanation sidesteps questions of **purpose** or **value**.

On the other hand, **libertarianism**, claiming our choices are entirely free from causes, contradicts evidence that our brains operate within physical constraints—decisions often begin before we're even aware of them (Soon et al., 2008).

The Limits of Classic Views

Neither view fully explains Lila's determination, Kwame's resolve, or Emma's renewal. These examples don't suggest uncaused freedom, but they do show the ability to **navigate constraints**, to build strength where none existed before.

This book offers a fresh approach: a model of **Feedback Compatibilism**, where agency is a potential you grow—like learning to paint or play soccer. Agency is your power to guide your actions, thoughts, and emotions: choosing to practice a skill, staying calm in a heated moment, or helping a neighbor. It's not complete freedom; your genes, environment, and past shape the possibilities. But it's a **real ability** you can strengthen.

A Feedback-Based Solution

Picture **Sofia**, a first-generation college student who builds confidence through a mentorship program, earning a degree despite financial hardship (Cohen et al., 2009). Agency varies: some, like Sofia, excel with support; others, like those with depression, face greater obstacles (Davidson et al., 2005). It's nurtured by encouraging surroundings, like supportive schools and communities rebuilding after crises (Aldrich, 2012), or hindered by stress (Masten, 2001). And it grows through **practice**, such as mindfulness reshaping neural pathways (Schwartz & Begley, 2002).

Friends, teachers, or communities can help develop it, as when a village unites to recover from disaster (Aldrich, 2012). Agency operates through a **feedback loop**: your conscious effort—practicing focus, for example—reshapes automatic habits, like ignoring distractions, which in turn informs future choices.

This process is driven by neural adaptations where the brain adjusts behavior based on **conflict monitoring** (Kerns et al., 2004). It creates a **spectrum of freedom**: from reflexes with no control, to instincts like fight-or-flight that can be shaped, to deliberate actions like Sofia's studies that reflect strong agency.

Why Responsibility Still Works

In mental illness, this loop weakens—depression clouds decision-making—but therapy or support can restore it (Davidson et al., 2005). **Responsibility** aligns with this spectrum: the greater your agency, the more accountable you are, justified by society's needs—preventing harm, fostering trust, driving progress—not abstract fairness (Sampson et al., 1997).

This model avoids the circular reasoning often criticized in determinism. Rather than stating, "Lila acted because it was caused," it explains how her agency developed—through therapy and practice rewiring her brain—and why it matters: her actions strengthened her team and community.

Rooted in Science and Society

Agency's roots lie in evolutionary pressures, where self-control enhanced survival (MacLean et al., 2014), not in an endless chain of causes. When asked why we hold Sofia accountable for her achievements, the answer points to her **trained agency**, shaped by mentors and education (Yeager & Walton, 2011), serving goals like societal progress through connected networks (Granovetter, 1973).

This approach feels **natural**, unlike determinism's mechanical view, and makes accountability **meaningful**, grounded in real processes rather than vague excuses.

Facing the Doubts

Skeptics might challenge this view, arguing the feedback loop is circular: "Effort builds agency, but isn't effort agency?" Others claim agency is an illusion, with unconscious brain signals driving actions (Wegner, 2002), or insist on freedom without constraints.

These objections fall short. Effort isn't circular—it's sparked by **external influences**, like coaches, mentors, or community support (Dweck & Yeager, 2019), and measurable in neural changes that guide behavior (Ridderinkhof et al., 2004). Agency is **real**, seen in our ability to reflect on decisions (Fleming et al., 2012) and in outcomes like Kwame's rebuilt school

(Pretty et al., 2003). Constraints, like Lila's injury or Emma's burnout, don't erase agency—they **shape** its expression.

What to Expect

This book unfolds across eight chapters, diving into agency's **mechanisms**, how **environments** shape it, ways to **train and teach** it, its role in **responsibility**, and its influence across **history**, **culture**, and **modern challenges** like technology. From a student's academic triumph to a community's recovery, we'll explore agency's power.

For readers seeking personal growth, this offers practical tools—mindfulness, education, connection—to strengthen your agency. For scholars, it presents a new compatibilist framework, inviting research into **neural dynamics** or **social systems**.

Final Reflection

By understanding and nurturing agency, we can transform lives and communities. Reflect: When have you felt in control of your path? What steps could you take to grow that ability?

Let's embark on this journey to **redefine free will**.

References in This Chapter

- Pretty et al. (2003), "The rapid emergence of civil society in rural Africa": Illustrates how communities, like Kwame's village, use collective agency to rebuild after crises.

- Soon et al. (2008), "Unconscious determinants of free decisions in the human brain": Shows brain activity precedes conscious awareness, challenging libertarian free will but supporting constrained agency.

- Cohen et al. (2009), "Recursive processes in self-affirmation": Demonstrates how mentorship programs boost confidence, as in Sofia's case.

- Davidson et al. (2005), “Recovery in serious mental illness”: Explores how therapy helps people with depression regain agency.

- Aldrich (2012), “Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery”: Shows how communities foster agency through collective support.

- Masten (2001), “Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development”: Highlights how supportive environments foster agency.

- Schwartz & Begley (2002), “The mind and the brain”: Reveals how mindfulness practices rewire neural pathways.

- Kerns et al. (2004), “Anterior cingulate conflict monitoring and adjustments in control”: Demonstrates how the brain adjusts behavior based on conflict.

- Sampson et al. (1997), “Neighborhoods and violent crime”: Shows how community actions shape agency and justify responsibility.

- MacLean et al. (2014), “The evolution of self-control”: Suggests agency evolved to navigate social challenges.

- Yeager & Walton (2011), “Social-psychological interventions in education”: Highlights how brief interventions foster student agency.

- Granovetter (1973), “The strength of weak ties”: Explains how social networks amplify agency.

- Ridderinkhof et al. (2004), “The role of the medial frontal cortex in cognitive control”: Reveals how the brain supports self-regulation.

- Wegner (2002), “The illusion of conscious will”: Argues unconscious signals drive actions, countered by evidence of reflective agency.

- Dweck & Yeager (2019), “Mindsets: A view from two eras”: Shows how growth mindset interventions foster agency.

- Fleming et al. (2012), “Metacognition: Computation, biology, and function”: Demonstrates how reflecting on decisions supports agency.

Chapter 1: Agency as a Talent

Picture Elena, a scientist facing failed experiments, her funding at risk. Each setback stings, but she persists, refining her approach. After months, she achieves a breakthrough, her paper a testament to her grit. Or consider **Maria**, a single mother with bipolar disorder, her moods once chaotic. Through therapy, she stabilizes, securing a job for her daughter's future (Davidson et al., 2005). Or imagine **Ravi**, a community leader in a drought-hit village, rallying neighbors to build a well, his resolve turning despair into action (Pretty et al., 2003). These aren't tales of defying fate—they show **agency**, a potential you grow, like honing a craft, shaped by effort and support.

Now picture **Jin**, a young violinist in rural China, told he has no future in music. Yet with the help of a traveling music teacher, he practices every night after chores. Years later, he wins a regional competition. Or **Tasha**, incarcerated at 18, who finds poetry in prison and emerges a published author. These stories illustrate agency across domains and constraints: scientific labs, mental illness, community leadership, incarceration, the arts. They remind us that even within tight boundaries, we can cultivate direction and resilience.

What is Agency?

Agency is your ability to guide your actions, thoughts, and emotions—choosing to practice a skill, resisting impulsivity, or helping others. It's not limitless; biology, experiences, and surroundings set boundaries, but it's a **talent** you can develop, like a knack for storytelling. Some wield it naturally, like Elena's tenacity; others, like Maria, face hurdles due to mental illness (Heine et al., 2001). This model of **Feedback Compatibilism** sees agency as constrained but developable. Unlike determinism, which claims all outcomes are inevitable, or libertarianism, which suggests uncaused choices, Feedback Compatibilism roots agency in effort, learning, and neuroplastic change.

Agency isn't about complete control. It's about **meaningful influence**. Tasha didn't control her early environment, but she shaped her future through poetry. Agency exists in the middle ground—not fate, not total freedom. It is like steering a sailboat: the wind and currents matter, but your skill and decisions determine your path.

The Myth of Total Control

A common misconception is that if we aren't completely free, we aren't free at all. This false binary distorts the real landscape of agency. **Refugees**, for example, may not choose where they live, but they can still choose how to rebuild their lives. A person with anxiety might not control their initial emotional reaction, but with support, they can learn to respond differently over time.

Even in prisons, we find examples of agency. Tasha's story isn't rare—creative writing, faith-based groups, or educational programs offer ways to practice self-direction. **Harriet Tubman**, born into slavery, repeatedly risked her life to lead others to freedom, exemplifying constrained yet courageous agency (Clinton, 2004). **Granovetter's theory of weak ties** shows how even casual social connections can unlock opportunity, demonstrating that influence doesn't always require control (Granovetter, 1973).

The Feedback Loop

Agency grows through a **feedback loop**: effort reshapes habits, guiding future choices. Consider a firefighter training to stay calm—those drills literally rewire fear's fight-or-flight instincts (Grossman & Christensen, 2007). In the brain, repeated effort strengthens or weakens neural connections. This process, known as **experience-dependent neuroplasticity**, allows you to build new habits of attention, emotion regulation, and behavior.

Neuroscientific studies show that regions like the **medial frontal cortex** and **prefrontal cortex** support this self-regulatory control (Ridderinkhof et al., 2004; Miller & Cohen, 2001). Elena's persistence in the lab isn't just psychological grit; it's a repeated pattern of neural activation that reinforces problem-solving behavior. Maria's therapy, meanwhile, helps her recognize emotional triggers and choose calmer responses—a change measurable in brain scans of patients recovering from mood disorders (Schwartz & Begley, 2002).

We can think of the feedback loop like a sculptor working with marble. Each effort chips away, shaping future reactions. Over time, self-directed behavior becomes more natural—not because it's effortless, but because practice has rewired the path.

Emotion and Effort

Critics often imagine effort as coldly cognitive, detached from emotion. But emotion is **central** to agency. Guilt can motivate repair; hope can drive persistence. Elena's frustration after failed experiments fuels her resolve. Maria's love for her daughter drives her recovery. Even anger—often maligned—can energize action when channeled constructively.

Neuroscientist **Antonio Damasio** showed that emotion and decision-making are deeply intertwined. People with impaired emotional processing struggle to make choices, not because they lack logic, but because they can't feel significance. Emotion gives effort its **meaning**, directing the feedback loop with motivational force.

A Spectrum of Freedom

Agency operates on a **spectrum**. Reflexes, like sneezing, are automatic. Instincts, like fight-or-flight triggered by fear, can be trained—firefighters learn to move toward danger rather than away (LeDoux & Gorman, 2001). Deliberate actions, like Elena's research, Maria's recovery, or Ravi's leadership, reflect high agency. They engage the brain's executive functions, planning, and emotional regulation systems.

Mental illness shifts actions toward low freedom. Bipolar episodes, like Maria's past manic states, cloud judgment. Yet, therapy and medication can restore the feedback loop, increasing the range of agency. This spectrum avoids determinism's flattening view and libertarianism's unrealistic ideal. It embraces the reality that agency grows.

Rebutting the Critics

Some skeptics say, "Effort builds agency, but isn't effort already agency?" This seems circular. But effort often begins from **external inputs**: coaching, therapy, community support, trauma, or mentorship. Maria's effort wasn't self-generating; it was sparked by care and structured guidance. Neuroscience confirms that feedback from others changes the brain's regulatory systems (Ridderinkhof et al., 2004).

Others claim agency is an illusion. Libet's famous experiments showed that brain activity precedes conscious decisions. But newer interpretations (e.g., Schurger et al., 2012) suggest the brain prepares **multiple possibilities**, and conscious attention helps select among them. Agency doesn't vanish because some neural preparation is unconscious.

Still others argue uniformity: that brains work similarly, so behavior is predictable. But **twin studies** (Joseph et al., 2001) show variability in traits like self-control and resilience, shaped by both genes and environment. Psychologist **Julian Rotter** found that people differ in whether they perceive themselves as agents of their own outcomes or not—what he called **locus of control** (Rotter, 1966). Agency arises from this variability—a product of difference, not sameness.

Closing Reflections

Agency is a **talent you grow**, shaped by your biology, your efforts, and your support systems. From Elena's lab to Tasha's prison cell, it manifests in different forms, on different scales. It doesn't require perfection; it requires engagement. Reflect: When has your agency shone—when you acted with clarity, effort, or care despite obstacles? What practice could strengthen that ability? Who might help you refine it?

The next chapter explores the **environments** that nurture or stifle agency—from classrooms to communities—and how your surroundings shape your capacity to act.

References in This Chapter

- Davidson et al. (2005), "Recovery in serious mental illness": Shows how therapy helps Maria regain agency, emphasizing restoration in mental illness.

- Pretty et al. (2003), "The rapid emergence of civil society in rural Africa": Illustrates collective agency in community recovery, as in Ravi's well.

- Clinton (2004), "Harriet Tubman: The road to freedom": Details Tubman's agency in leading others, showing power within constraints.

- Heine et al. (2001), “Divergent consequences of success and failure in Japan and North America”: Highlights cultural differences shaping agency, as in mental illness.

- Granovetter (1973), “The strength of weak ties”: Shows how networks support agency, as in Tasha’s recovery.

- Miller & Cohen (2001), “An integrative theory of prefrontal cortex function”: Reveals the prefrontal cortex’s role in self-regulation, supporting agency’s neural basis.

- Rotter (1966), “Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement”: Shows belief in control varies, underpinning agency’s psychology.

- Schwartz & Begley (2002), “The mind and the brain”: Reveals how effort rewires neural pathways, supporting the feedback loop.

- Grossman & Christensen (2007), “On Combat”: Details how firefighters train to override flight instincts, illustrating the feedback loop.

- Ridderinkhof et al. (2004), “The role of the medial frontal cortex in cognitive control”: Shows how the medial frontal cortex guides self-regulation.

- LeDoux & Gorman (2001), “The amygdala and its role in fear conditioning”: Explains how training reshapes firefighters’ fear responses.

- Joseph et al. (2001), “Genetic and environmental influences on the development of personality”: Reveals agency’s variability through twin studies.

- Damasio (1994), “Descartes' Error”: Highlights the essential role of emotion in rational agency.

- Wegner (2002), “The illusion of conscious will”: Argues unconscious signals drive actions, countered by agency’s reality.

- Fleming et al. (2012), “Metacognition: Computation, biology, and function”: Shows metacognition supports agency, as in Elena’s planning.

- Haggard (2008), “Human volition: Towards a neuroscience of will”: Suggests neural uniformity, countered by variability.

- Schurger et al. (2012), “An accumulator model for spontaneous neural activity prior to self-initiated movement”: Reinterprets Libet's findings, suggesting agency remains viable.

Chapter 2: The Power of Environment

Picture Chloe, a bright student who struggles in an overcrowded school. Her teachers rotate constantly, the building lacks resources, and her efforts go unnoticed. Despite her potential, her grades slip. Now imagine **Noah**, raised in a neighborhood with safe parks, supportive mentors, and music programs. He channels his energy into violin and volunteer work, thriving academically. These contrasting stories show how **agency is not just personal** – it's deeply shaped by our **social environments**.

Environments Shape Agency

While agency can grow through individual effort, its **development is relational**. It is trained, supported, or stifled by families, schools, neighborhoods, and cultural norms. **Kwame's** story in Chapter 1 reflected not only his leadership but also the collective power of his village (Pretty et al., 2003). Environments provide the tools, encouragement, and safety needed to convert potential into action.

Research confirms this. Children raised in communities with **low collective efficacy** – where residents lack trust or shared values – face more crime, instability, and stress (Sampson et al., 1997). These environments suppress agency, not through direct control, but by eroding the support systems it requires.

Schools and Mentors as Scaffolding

Mentorship and school climate are crucial. **Sofia**, from the Introduction, benefited from mentorship and belief in her potential (Cohen et al., 2009). That belief wasn't magical; it sparked a **recursive process** where support increased effort, which built confidence, which attracted more support.

In contrast, schools that label students early or rely on rigid discipline can shut down agency before it develops. A child who acts out may be met with punishment rather than

coaching, reinforcing low expectations. **Yeager and Walton** found that even brief interventions that affirm student value can trigger lasting academic growth (Yeager & Walton, 2011).

These effects are magnified by race, class, and culture. Students of color often face implicit bias that limits teachers' expectations, affecting feedback and opportunity. Meanwhile, affluent students may benefit from **social capital** that cushions failure and encourages persistence (Granovetter, 1973).

Community Structures That Uplift

Agency thrives in **resilient communities**. After disasters, neighborhoods with strong social ties recover more quickly, not just physically, but psychologically (Aldrich, 2012). Trust, shared norms, and coordinated action enable individuals to see possibilities rather than defeat. In these environments, effort feels worthwhile because others reinforce its value.

Compare that to **Chloe's** school, where crowded classrooms and overwhelmed staff send a different message: "You don't matter here." Her potential isn't erased, but without feedback and support, her agency struggles to grow.

This shows why **social structures matter**. They don't determine who we become, but they create conditions that make **certain futures more or less possible**.

Stress and Suppressed Agency

Stress isn't just unpleasant; it **narrows cognitive and emotional bandwidth**. Poverty, discrimination, and instability consume the mental resources that could otherwise go toward growth. This undermines the feedback loop that builds agency.

Psychologist **Ann Masten** called resilience "ordinary magic" – not a trait, but a product of ordinary supports: caring adults, safe routines, consistent expectations (Masten, 2001). Without these, effort is harder to initiate and sustain.

Neuroscientific studies back this up. Chronic stress weakens the brain’s self-regulatory regions, while positive feedback strengthens them (Ridderinkhof et al., 2004). In low-support environments, even small efforts can feel futile, making disengagement more likely.

Why Equality of Opportunity Isn’t Enough

The phrase "equal opportunity" often masks unequal starting points. Agency develops over time through a series of interactions and reinforcements. If those inputs are unequally distributed, so is the ability to act freely.

This doesn’t mean people in tough environments lack agency—many, like Chloe, push through and succeed. But they do so at a higher cost. And when they falter, society often blames the individual without asking what support was missing.

Cultural Stories of Effort

Culture shapes which forms of agency are recognized and rewarded. In some societies, agency is defined by independence and personal success; in others, by interdependence and group harmony. (Heine et al., 2001) found that students in Japan responded to failure by increasing effort, while North American students often withdrew. Cultural messages shape what effort means, and whether it's seen as a path to growth or a sign of inadequacy.

For policy and education, this matters. Encouraging agency must align with local values and experiences, or it risks reinforcing dominant norms while ignoring community strengths.

Expanding the Feedback Loop

The agency feedback loop isn't isolated in one brain. It is **socially extended**. Mentors model behavior. Peers reinforce identity. Institutions provide or withhold chances. When support systems are strong, effort becomes more effective; when they are weak, it stalls.

This also suggests that we can **design environments** to grow agency more effectively. From trauma-informed schools to mentorship programs to neighborhood planning, we have tools to widen the zone where people can act meaningfully.

Closing Reflections

Agency is never just an individual achievement. It is built in the spaces between people – in classrooms, neighborhoods, and communities. Reflect: Who has helped your agency grow? What structures made your efforts possible? And what could be changed to help others find the same chance?

The next chapter explores how agency can be **trained and strengthened** through deliberate practices that shape habits, emotions, and decision-making over time.

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- Pretty et al. (2003), "The rapid emergence of civil society in rural Africa": Highlights community agency as in Kwame's village.

- Sampson et al. (1997), "Neighborhoods and violent crime": Shows how low collective efficacy suppresses agency.

- Cohen et al. (2009), "Recursive processes in self-affirmation": Explains Sofia's mentorship-driven growth.

- Yeager & Walton (2011), "Social-psychological interventions in education": Demonstrates how brief support boosts agency in students.

- Granovetter (1973), "The strength of weak ties": Explains how social capital enhances opportunity and persistence.

- Aldrich (2012), "Building Resilience": Shows community recovery depends on shared norms and ties.

- Masten (2001), "Ordinary magic": Defines resilience as emerging from everyday social supports.

- Ridderinkhof et al. (2004), "The role of the medial frontal cortex": Details how support or stress changes regulatory function in the brain.

- Heine et al. (2001), "Divergent consequences of success and failure": Shows cultural influences on interpretations of effort.

Chapter 3: Training and Teaching Agency

Picture Mateo, a teenager struggling with anger issues. At school, he often lashes out and gets sent home. But after joining a youth boxing club led by a former teacher, he learns discipline. Over time, he channels frustration into focus, learns to pause before reacting, and even mentors younger students. Or consider **Leila**, an executive who uses daily mindfulness practice to regulate stress, helping her make thoughtful decisions under pressure. These aren't stories of instant change—they reveal how agency is **trainable**, like any skill.

Effort Creates Habits

Agency develops through a process where effort shapes behavior, which reinforces effort. This is the **feedback loop** in action. Repeated choices strengthen the brain circuits involved in self-regulation. In Mateo's case, pausing before hitting wasn't easy—it had to be practiced, rewarded, and repeated until it became natural.

This isn't metaphorical. Studies show that regions of the brain like the **anterior cingulate cortex** and **prefrontal cortex** become more efficient with use (Ridderinkhof et al., 2004; Kerns et al., 2004). Mindfulness, for instance, not only reduces stress but improves executive function by training attention and emotional awareness (Schwartz & Begley, 2002).

Practices That Build Agency

Agency training doesn't require major programs—it often begins with small, repeated practices:

- **Mindfulness** helps build awareness of impulses.
- **Goal-setting** and journaling reinforce planning and reflection.
- **Cognitive-behavioral strategies** teach people to reframe situations and change responses.

These aren't just therapeutic tools. In schools, even short exercises that build reflection or resilience have lasting effects. One study found that teaching adolescents about **brain plasticity** increased their academic effort and performance (Yeager & Walton, 2011).

In Leila's case, mindfulness lets her **notice the tension** building in a meeting before she speaks. She chooses a calmer response because her awareness gives her options. That's trained agency: creating space between impulse and action.

Agency Requires Reinforcement

Skills fade without reinforcement. Mateo's boxing club mattered because it provided **consistent structure and feedback**. He got better because his effort was noticed and redirected. Without this social reinforcement, effort often feels futile and fades.

This is where environments and training intersect. Agency becomes more sustainable when **the people around us respond** to our efforts constructively. Teachers, coaches, therapists, or peers provide correction, encouragement, or context. This guides the feedback loop in productive directions.

Emotion as Fuel

Motivation is not just rational—it's emotional. Leila's drive to stay calm stems from care for her team. Mateo's focus grows from pride in mentoring others. **Antonio Damasio** argued that emotions provide the significance behind our choices (Damasio, 1994). Training agency means connecting behavior to values and feelings, not suppressing them.

Agency practice fails when it's disconnected from meaning. Programs that drill behavior without context—like zero-tolerance discipline—might suppress acting out temporarily, but don't train deeper regulation. Without emotional connection, there's no lasting change.

Training Is Not One-Size-Fits-All

Different people need different strategies. For someone with anxiety, agency training might focus on **reframing fear** and developing calming routines. For someone like Mateo, it might involve **body-based regulation** and role modeling. Cultural context matters too—some communities respond better to collective forms of effort, others to individual framing.

This flexibility is key to effective training. Programs that assume one path to self-control risk reinforcing bias and misunderstanding. Recognizing the variety in agency helps educators, parents, and policymakers design better systems.

A Lifelong Process

Agency isn't just for youth. Adults continue training agency across life transitions—parenthood, illness, leadership, grief. Skills like reflection, emotional regulation, and purposeful action must be maintained and adapted. As environments shift, so must the feedback loops that support effort.

Consider a recovering addict attending support groups, learning to track triggers and celebrate small victories. Or a retiree starting meditation to navigate identity loss after leaving a career. These aren't stories of fate or freedom—but of **daily, deliberate practice** that reshapes lives.

Closing Reflections

Agency isn't built by willpower alone. It's trained through **practice, structure, and emotional connection**. Reflect: What effort have you practiced into habit? Who reinforced that process for you? What skill could you begin training now to expand your sense of choice?

The next chapter explores how this trained agency connects to **moral and legal responsibility**—and why acknowledging different levels of agency matters for justice and fairness.

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- Kerns et al. (2004), "Anterior cingulate conflict monitoring and adjustments in control": Explains how the brain adapts to conflict through practice.

- Schwartz & Begley (2002), "The mind and the brain": Details how mindfulness retrains attention and emotion through neuroplasticity.

- Yeager & Walton (2011), "Social-psychological interventions in education": Demonstrates how brief training can strengthen student agency through mindset.

- Damasio (1994), "Descartes' Error": Emphasizes the emotional basis of rational decision-making and agency.

Chapter 4: The Responsibility Spectrum

Picture Jasmine, a high school senior who hacks her school's system to change a grade, later regretting it and facing a disciplinary hearing. Now imagine **Cameron**, a young man with untreated schizophrenia, assaulting someone during a delusion. Or **Lena**, coerced into drug trafficking under threat of violence. Or consider **Henry**, a repeat violent offender whose actions persist despite interventions. All cause harm—but should they face the same judgment? **Responsibility**, like agency, exists on a **spectrum**, shaped by the capacity to choose.

Why Responsibility Varies

Responsibility hinges on **agency**—the ability to act deliberately, shaped by training, support, and context. In our **Feedback Compatibilist** model, agency is a talent, grown through effort and environment, not a binary trait. Someone with strong **self-regulation**, like Jasmine, can choose differently, bearing greater responsibility. Others, like Cameron, may lack **functional control** due to mental illness, or like Lena, face **constrained choices** under fear. This spectrum aligns with how we judge actions: a teenager's mistake differs from a coerced act or a psychotic episode.

Degrees of Agency

The **agency spectrum** ranges from **high agency**—deliberate, reflective choices—to **low agency**, where instincts or external pressures dominate. Jasmine's calculated hack reflects **high agency**, her **prefrontal cortex** enabling planning (Miller & Cohen, 2001). Cameron's schizophrenia disrupts this, his delusions overriding control, limiting agency (Davidson et al., 2005). Lena's coercion narrows her options, fear triggering flight instincts, constraining agency (Steadman et al., 2000). Henry's persistent violence, despite interventions, suggests a **deficit in agency restoration**, posing unique challenges (Monahan, 2006). Neuroscience shows the **prefrontal cortex** matures into the 20s, and illness or stress can impair it, shaping responsibility's scope.

Justification, Not Retribution

My model favors **justificatory justice**—assigning responsibility to serve **societal goals** like safety, rehabilitation, or growth—over **retributive justice**, which punishes for its own sake. The question isn't "What do they deserve?" but "What response prevents harm and builds agency?" For Jasmine, a hearing fosters accountability, reinforcing her **feedback loop**. For Cameron, treatment addresses his **low agency**, reducing recidivism (Davidson et al., 2005). Lena's coercion demands **contextual justice**, like diversion programs, not punishment. Henry's case, however, prioritizes **public safety**, as we'll explore.

Cultural Lenses on Responsibility

Responsibility varies across cultures, reflecting diverse views on agency. Western systems emphasize individual accountability, as in Jasmine's hearing. **Restorative justice**, seen in Maori traditions or Rwandan gacaca courts, prioritizes **community healing**, where offenders make amends to rebuild trust (Braithwaite, 2002). In Japan, public apologies, like bowing, model **agency of accountability**, reintegrating offenders (Heine et al., 2001). These approaches show responsibility as a **social act**, not just a personal failing, aligning with my model's focus on **feedback loops**.

Why Accountability Persists

Critics of compatibilism argue that if choices are caused, blame is meaningless. Yet we distinguish **intentional acts** from accidents or patterns. A child spilling juice isn't blamed, but a repeat offender like Henry faces scrutiny. Feedback Compatibilism's **agency spectrum** clarifies this: accountability reflects **trained capacity**, not uncaused freedom. Holding Jasmine accountable reinforces her **self-regulation**. For Cameron, treatment rebuilds capacity, not blame (Davidson et al., 2005). This doesn't erase responsibility—it grounds it in **social purpose**, fostering growth and safety.

Restoring Agency

When harm occurs, **restoring agency** is often the best response. Jasmine's apology and hearing build her **feedback loop**, teaching accountability. Lena's diversion program, offering support over jail, addresses her **constrained agency** (Steadman et al., 2000). **Restorative**

circles, where offenders process harm with peers, reinforce **self-regulation** (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001). Even prisons, when rehabilitative, can foster agency through education or mentorship, unlike punitive systems that erode it. These aren't soft—they're **strategic investments** in agency.

Systemic Responsibility

Responsibility extends beyond individuals. Was Jasmine's hack driven by academic pressure? Did Cameron lack mental health access? Was Lena's coercion enabled by systemic failures? **Societal systems**—schools, healthcare, legal protections—shape **agency's conditions**. A society committed to responsibility must ensure **environments** that foster **self-regulation**, from equitable education to accessible care. Ignoring this risks perpetuating harm, undermining the **feedback loop** at its core.

Public Safety Imperative

In rare cases, individuals pose an **irreversible danger**—persistent violent offenders like Henry, or those with untreatable psychosis or severe personality disorders. Here, **public safety** is the **primary ethical obligation**, overriding rehabilitation or individual rights. If agency cannot be restored and risk remains high, **containment**—secure hospitalization or incarceration—is justified to protect society, regardless of moral responsibility (Monahan, 2006). This isn't punishment but **prevention**, ensuring communities remain safe from unmitigated threats.

Forensic research supports this: risk assessment models identify individuals whose patterns of harm persist despite interventions (Steadman et al., 2000). **Containment decisions** must be evidence-based, regularly reviewed, and minimally restrictive, but **public safety** takes precedence. These cases mark the model's **boundary**: when agency restoration fails, society's protection is paramount, a stance rooted in **practical necessity**, not retribution.

Closing Reflections

Responsibility is a spectrum, reflecting **agency's variability**. From Jasmine's accountability to Henry's containment, responses must align with capacity and **societal goals**. Reflect: When have you seen accountability foster growth? When must **public safety** draw a line,

and how can it be just? The next chapter explores **history and culture**, revealing how societies shape agency across time.

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- Miller & Cohen (2001), “An integrative theory of prefrontal cortex function”: Shows Jasmine’s prefrontal cortex enables planning, supporting high agency.

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- Steadman et al. (2000), “Violence by people discharged from acute psychiatric inpatient facilities”: Supports Lena’s constrained agency and containment for high-risk cases.

- Monahan (2006), “A jurisprudence of risk assessment”: Justifies containment for Henry’s persistent danger, prioritizing public safety.

- Braithwaite (2002), “Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation”: Explores restorative justice, emphasizing community healing over punishment.

- Heine et al. (2001), “Divergent consequences of success and failure in Japan and North America”: Highlights Japan’s apology rituals as agency-driven accountability.

- Bazemore & Umbreit (2001), “A comparison of four restorative conferencing models”: Describes peer-led restorative circles fostering agency post-harm.

Chapter 5: Agency in History and Culture

Imagine Malik, a blacksmith's apprentice in medieval Europe. His daily life follows a rigid caste-like structure, inherited from his father. Personal freedom is narrow, obedience expected. Now contrast with **Kira**, a university student in modern Sweden who leads a youth mentorship program for immigrant children. Her life is full of choice and expression—an example of a world that not only allows but **trains agency**. Across time and culture, the scope for agency has shifted, not just by chance, but through **structures that enable or suppress its development**.

Culture as a Training Ground—or a Cage

Culture shapes what people do, but more importantly, what they believe they **can** do. In collectivist cultures, agency is honed through loyalty, responsibility, and social harmony. In individualist cultures, it's built around autonomy and personal expression. Each system instills different **feedback loops** that train the talent of agency in line with its values.

In Japan, agency is cultivated through apology and restoration rituals that reinforce reflection and responsibility (Heine et al., 2001). In North America, students trained with a "growth mindset"—the belief that effort builds ability—show greater academic persistence, illustrating how **cultural messages train self-belief and perseverance** (Dweck & Yeager, 2019).

In Islamic traditions, agency includes submission to divine will but encourages moral striving and social obligation. In Confucian contexts, agency emerges through duty and role-excellence. These aren't signs of passive conformity but examples of **agency expressed through culturally trained channels**.

Historical Constraints, Historical Training

Determinists might argue that history's conditions—colonialism, slavery, patriarchy—predetermined people's fates. Yet, history provides evidence of constrained but real agency that **pushes back against deterministic narratives**.

Enslaved people in the Americas secretly taught each other to read. Dalits in India formed educational movements to defy caste oppression. Harriet Tubman, Gandhi, and others demonstrate that within brutal limits, **agency can be trained through resistance**, not just privilege.

These are not heroic anomalies—they are human examples of the brain's capacity to rewire through repeated effort, even in hostile systems. They support the Feedback Compatibilist model: **agency is a potential**, activated and strengthened through effort, community, and feedback.

When History Unlocks New Possibilities

Moments of social transformation often **expand the tools available to train agency**. Public education systems gave millions the cognitive and emotional scaffolding for self-direction. Post-colonial movements emphasized national self-determination and civic participation. Even access to bicycles and radios expanded women's and rural communities' sense of autonomy.

Technology continues this trend, but with complications. Social media empowers marginalized voices—yet also hijacks attention and decision-making. The internet offers infinite information, but little guidance on discernment. Tools alone don't build agency; **they must be embedded in feedback systems that train clarity and restraint**.

Collective Movements as Feedback Loops

Agency is often trained **through community**, not isolation. Civil rights movements and Indigenous resistance efforts formed **networks of support, correction, and**

empowerment. Within these, individuals developed the courage and clarity to act despite structural barriers.

Consider the training embedded in protest planning, in nonviolent discipline, in mutual aid networks. These communities didn't just demand freedom—they **taught it**, often better than formal systems. Collective agency, then, is not separate from individual agency; it **amplifies and trains it**.

Cultural Tools That Build Self-Regulation

Many traditions include practices that mirror the principles of training agency: feedback, reflection, perseverance. Examples include:

- Tibetan monastic debate, honing emotional regulation and logic.
- Indigenous storytelling that encodes moral and practical lessons.
- African proverbs used in family teaching.
- Coming-of-age rituals that link identity with responsibility.

These are not merely rites—they're **deliberate tools** for cultivating the neural and emotional systems of agency.

Cultural Capital and Trained Competence

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu described how **cultural capital**—the knowledge, habits, and language of dominant groups—gives people a strategic edge (Bourdieu, 1986). Those lacking access to this capital may still train agency, but with more friction, fewer feedback loops, and slower social reward.

This reinforces why agency is **not just a natural endowment**, but a trained talent that depends on context. Cultural capital shapes how effort is noticed, rewarded, and sustained—or whether it is ignored and eroded.

Returning to the Core Argument

This chapter's examples—from Tubman to Tibetan monks—support the central thesis: **agency is not an illusion** nor an uncaused mystery. It's a trainable capacity, shaped by culture and constrained by history, but **real and usable**. Determinism misses the role of training; libertarianism misses the role of constraint. My Feedback Compatibilism model insists on both: effort matters, because context shapes effort's effect.

Closing Reflections

Reflect: What forms of agency has your culture trained in you? Where has it reinforced perseverance or discouraged initiative? What traditions or technologies help you shape your feedback loop today?

The next chapter turns to the future—how technology is reshaping the landscape of human agency.

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- Dweck & Yeager (2019), "Mindsets: A view from two eras": Examines how growth mindset and motivation vary by social and cultural context.
- Bourdieu (1986), "The Forms of Capital": Explains how cultural knowledge and social cues shape access to power.

Chapter 6: Agency in the Modern World

Imagine Elias, a teenager growing up in a world of constant notifications. His schedule is dictated by algorithms—what he sees, when he responds, how he studies. Now imagine **Asha**, a mid-career teacher learning to use artificial intelligence to adapt lessons to each student's needs. Both live in a time when **technology no longer just aids decisions—it shapes the conditions for making them**. In this new landscape, the stakes for understanding and training agency are higher than ever.

Tools That Amplify or Undermine Agency

Technology can train agency when used with intention. Asha's adaptive tools help students learn at their own pace, offering real-time feedback and emotional engagement. These features act like supportive coaches, reinforcing effort and strengthening neural patterns. Much like scaffolding in education, well-designed systems can expand agency by making challenges manageable and growth visible.

Empirical studies support this promise. For instance, short-term mindfulness apps have been shown to improve attention and emotional regulation, offering measurable gains in self-control and agency-supportive cognitive functions (Tang et al., 2007).

But technology can also **undermine agency**. Elias's experience is more common—apps designed to trigger compulsive behavior through variable rewards, infinite scrolls, and constant alerts. These interfaces hijack attention and dull reflective capacity. Instead of strengthening the feedback loop of agency, they **short-circuit it**.

(Alter, 2017) documents how platforms exploit psychological vulnerabilities to drive compulsive engagement, eroding the ability to reflect and choose freely. Rather than supporting growth, these systems deepen the grooves of reactivity, bypassing conscious intention.

This is where determinism gains traction in public discourse: when behavior feels scripted by external systems, our freedom appears illusory. But Feedback Compatibilism offers a better interpretation: **agency can be degraded or cultivated by systems**, and that's precisely why feedback and training matter.

The Myth of Infinite Choice

The internet promises endless freedom—limitless learning, shopping, social connection. But **choice is not the same as agency**. Agency requires **discernment, prioritization, and emotional regulation**. Without these, abundant options become distractions, not opportunities.

This reflects a key distinction from libertarian views. Libertarian free will imagines unconstrained decision-making. But in practice, unconstrained choice often leads to **decision fatigue, anxiety, or paralysis**. True agency lies in structured freedom—the ability to **engage and refine a goal-directed path**, not to flit endlessly among options.

Digital Habits as Feedback Loops

Just like agency in education or recovery, **digital agency is trainable**. Practices like digital minimalism, attention tracking, or intentional app use mirror the very principles of effort and feedback central to my model.

For example:

- Setting screen time goals and adjusting based on reflection.
- Using apps that support meditation, journaling, or goal setting.
- Cultivating communities that share strategies for digital self-regulation.

Studies show that even basic self-monitoring of screen time can increase awareness and reduce compulsive use (Wilmer et al., 2017). These techniques replicate the **feedback loops that develop agency over time**.

These are not fixes imposed from above—they are **agency-supporting structures** that help individuals shape their behavior over time. They're modern analogs to the cultural rituals discussed in the last chapter.

When AI Becomes the Decision-Maker

Emerging technologies like AI challenge traditional understandings of agency. Recommendation systems decide what we watch or read. Autonomous systems may even decide who gets hired or flagged by law enforcement. These tools operate invisibly, training behavior without conscious feedback.

A deterministic reading might say: "See? We are controlled." But my model says: **We must design systems that train agency, not replace it.**

In fact, research shows that users are significantly influenced by algorithmic recommendations—even when their preferences might differ (Yeomans et al., 2019). This illustrates that reflection, not automation, must be central to system design.

This includes:

- Making algorithmic processes transparent.
- Giving users control over settings and defaults.
- Creating interfaces that encourage reflection, not reaction.

Asha, the teacher, embodies this principle. She uses AI to support student agency, not to dictate content. The technology adapts, but the human remains the guide. That's the design philosophy needed to preserve freedom in the digital age.

The Ethical Imperative

Societies will increasingly face choices about how to use technology to **train or tame agency**. Surveillance systems, persuasive design, and AI-driven governance offer efficiency—but they risk eroding autonomy if unchecked.

Responsibility lies not only with individual users but with designers, educators, and policymakers. Like physical environments, digital systems are **social constructs** that either strengthen or sap the neural pathways of effortful choice.

We must ask:

- Does this tool support intentional reflection?
- Does it offer feedback that builds self-regulation?
- Does it expand or constrict future possibilities?

These are not just UX questions—they're questions about the **future of human freedom**.

Closing Reflections

Technology is neither savior nor villain. It is a **feedback amplifier**—one that can strengthen or weaken the circuits of agency. Reflect: What digital habits have shaped your attention, effort, or emotional regulation? How might you redesign your digital life to train your agency, not fragment it?

The next chapter explores what these insights mean for how we teach and raise the next generation.

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Chapter 7: Defending the Model: Challenges and Circularity

Imagine Sofia, a middle school teacher who notices her students struggle with focus and self-control. She introduces brief daily exercises—mindfulness, reflection journaling, goal-setting—that help students recognize and direct their impulses. Now imagine **Daniel**, a parent working to model emotional regulation at home, providing supportive but firm boundaries. Both play a role in training the talent of agency.

Early Foundations of Agency

Agency begins developing in early childhood through interactions with caregivers. Responsive parenting fosters **secure attachment**, which supports emotional regulation and a sense of control. Children who experience consistent support learn that their efforts can influence outcomes, creating the initial feedback loops essential to agency development (Sroufe et al., 2005).

Conversely, neglect or inconsistent responses can disrupt these loops, leading to challenges in self-regulation and decision-making.

The Role of Education

Schools have a powerful influence on agency development. Interventions focused on **executive function** skills—including working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control—show promising effects on academic and social outcomes (Diamond & Lee, 2011). Sofia's classroom practices reflect this research: brief, focused activities help students strengthen these abilities.

Programs like the **Tools of the Mind** curriculum have demonstrated that supporting students step-by-step as they develop new skills—what educators call **scaffolding**—can improve children's problem-solving and attention (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

Parental Modeling and Support

Parents like Daniel influence agency not only through rules but through their own emotional regulation and behavior. Modeling calm responses to stress teaches children how to manage emotions. Supportive discipline balances structure with autonomy, encouraging children to practice making choices within limits (Kochanska et al., 2001).

Research shows that children's beliefs about how much control they have over outcomes—their **sense of personal control** or "locus of control"—develop in these early contexts (Rotter, 1966). A strong internal sense of control supports effort, persistence, and self-regulation.

Training Through Deliberate Practice

Agency training requires repeated, reflective practice. Mindfulness-based programs have gained attention for helping youth develop attention and emotional regulation (Zenner et al., 2014). Journaling and goal-setting foster metacognition—thinking about one's thinking—which supports self-directed growth (Zimmerman, 2002).

Such practices work because they engage the **feedback loops** that physically rewire brain circuits involved in self-control (Schwartz & Begley, 2002).

Cultural and Socioeconomic Factors

The effectiveness of agency training depends on cultural relevance and socioeconomic context. Programs tailored to community values and realities show better outcomes. For example, **culturally adapted mindfulness** practices have been effective in diverse populations (Christopher et al., 2016).

Socioeconomic stressors can impair agency development, but targeted supports—such as mentoring and safe environments—help offset risks (Masten, 2014).

Challenges and Equity in Agency Education

Inequities in educational resources, family stability, and community support create disparities in agency development. Children in under-resourced schools may have fewer opportunities to practice self-regulation or receive consistent feedback.

Equity-focused interventions seek to close these gaps, recognizing agency as both an individual and systemic issue (Reardon, 2011).

Building Lifelong Agency

Agency training doesn't stop at childhood. Adolescents and adults benefit from programs that develop reflection, emotional control, and goal management. For example, **executive coaching** for adults can increase workplace effectiveness (Grant, 2014). Community programs for older adults promote engagement and decision-making, preserving agency in aging (Rebok et al., 2014).

Closing Reflections

Training agency is a shared responsibility—across families, schools, and communities. Reflect: Who shaped your early feedback loops? What habits help you regulate your actions today? How might teaching and parenting better support agency in the next generation?

The next chapter explores agency's role in justice and moral responsibility.

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Chapter 8: Agency, Justice, and Moral Responsibility

Imagine Nora, a juror in a criminal trial. She's tasked with deciding whether the defendant is guilty and morally responsible for the harm caused. What Nora is really judging—whether she knows it or not—is the person's **agency**. Did they act freely, or were their choices shaped by forces that weakened their self-regulation? Were they capable of responding to reasons and consequences, or were they overwhelmed by trauma, illness, or coercion?

In a feedback-based model of free will, agency isn't about uncaused decisions—it's about the trained ability to reflect, regulate, and respond to one's environment. Justice systems, then, are ultimately in the business of **assessing and addressing agency**.

Responsibility Is Proportional to Agency

Modern legal systems often distinguish between levels of culpability. Premeditated acts receive more severe sentences than crimes of passion. Youth are treated differently than adults. The Feedback Compatibilist model explains why: the more agency a person has trained and exercised, the more reasonable it is to hold them morally and legally responsible.

Studies support this idea. Neuroscientific research shows that the prefrontal cortex—critical for judgment and impulse control—continues developing into the mid-20s (Steinberg et al., 2008). This underpins why adolescents are seen as having diminished responsibility. Similarly, trauma, psychosis, and addiction impair regulatory systems central to agency.

Accountability and Responsibility Are Not the Same

It's important to distinguish between **responsibility** and **accountability**. A person may not be fully responsible for their actions due to impaired agency—caused by mental illness, coercion, or underdevelopment—but they may still need to be **held accountable** in order to maintain public safety, repair harm, or engage in rehabilitation.

Accountability means being answerable for one's actions in a way that seeks to **contain danger, restore agency, or protect society**. It does not always require blame or harsh punishment. In fact, accountability systems that focus on education, treatment, and structured reflection can better align with the goal of fostering agency.

Justice Systems as Feedback Loops

A justice system can either support or erode agency. **Retributive justice** systems that focus on punishment may reinforce shame and fear, suppressing the self-reflection needed for growth. In contrast, **restorative justice** systems provide feedback that fosters responsibility, reconciliation, and personal development (Sherman & Strang, 2007).

Programs like restorative conferencing, where offenders meet with victims and community members, have been shown to reduce recidivism while increasing empathy and self-regulation (Latimer et al., 2005). These are agency-training mechanisms, not just conflict resolution strategies.

Moral Responsibility and the Continuum of Control

Philosophical debates over moral responsibility often hinge on whether a person "could have done otherwise." But in the Feedback Compatibilist view, the real question is: **how well was the person trained to do otherwise?** Did they have the habits, emotional skills, and contextual support to regulate themselves in that moment?

This model doesn't deny accountability—it **grounds it** in something observable and improvable. A person's responsibility is not a metaphysical abstraction; it is a measure of their agency at the time of action.

Hard Cases: Diminished and Irreversible Agency

Some individuals present edge cases—those with severe mental illness, brain injury, or long-standing patterns of violence. In such cases, agency may be impaired not just temporarily,

but persistently. When regulation cannot be restored, **containment becomes ethically necessary**—not as punishment, but as a safeguard for others.

However, containment should still aim toward rehabilitation. Where there is hope of restoring agency, that path must be pursued. Research shows that with the right support, some individuals once deemed irredeemable can rebuild capacities for empathy and self-control (Skeem et al., 2011). Blanket assumptions about dangerousness can become self-fulfilling, reducing motivation for change.

Responsibility as Justification, Not Retribution

Moral responsibility serves a purpose: it justifies responses that are aimed at growth, repair, or prevention. The question shifts from “What punishment is deserved?” to “What response promotes future agency?” This aligns with **justificatory justice**, which evaluates outcomes based on how they support individual and collective flourishing (Duff, 2001).

Agency Across Cultures and Systems

Not all systems of justice evaluate agency in the same way. In some Indigenous traditions, wrongdoing is seen not just as a personal failure, but as a rupture in relational networks. The response is not retribution but **rebalancing**—restoring the harmony that supports everyone’s agency (Zehr, 2002).

Such approaches remind us that moral responsibility is always embedded in **context**. Culture, history, and community values shape how agency is interpreted and how justice is carried out.

Closing Reflections

Agency is not a yes-or-no trait—it is a spectrum of ability, shaped by development, context, and effort. Justice, then, must be about recognizing and cultivating that ability wherever possible. It must also be about accountability—not as revenge, but as responsibility to society. Reflect: When have you seen justice support someone’s growth? When has it protected others from harm? When has it failed to do either?

The next chapter explores how the Feedback Compatibilist view of agency applies to the question of meaning in life.

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Chapter 9: Agency and the Search for Meaning

Imagine Luis, a retired engineer volunteering at a local community center. He tutors students in math, helps with food distribution, and mentors a young man recently released from prison. Luis finds purpose not in leisure, but in contribution. He feels most alive when helping others grow. This is not accidental—his sense of meaning arises directly from his ability to act intentionally in the world. **His agency is not just intact; it's directed.**

The search for meaning is a central human concern. Philosophers, psychologists, and spiritual leaders have all offered interpretations. But meaning becomes personal—existentially relevant—only when it is **acted upon**. In the Feedback Compatibilist model, the capacity to experience meaning depends on the **trained ability to engage, reflect, and choose**. Meaning doesn't emerge from randomness or from unconstrained will—it emerges from the cultivation and application of agency.

The Link Between Agency and Purpose

Psychological research shows that people who feel a strong sense of purpose also report higher well-being, resilience, and motivation (Ryff & Singer, 1998; Hill et al., 2016). These outcomes correlate with traits associated with agency: self-regulation, goal-setting, and a sense of effectiveness. In other words, people feel meaning when they are **capable of acting on their values.**

This reinforces the Feedback Compatibilist claim: free will, in any practical or moral sense, is not a mystery—it's a trained, adaptive relationship with the world. We experience ourselves as free when we can align action with intention in a way that creates feedback, growth, and impact.

Meaning as a Feedback Loop

Like agency itself, meaning is constructed over time through **patterns of feedback**. Consider how people find meaning in parenting, creative work, teaching, or activism. These roles provide continuous reflection: challenges arise, skills are refined, impact is felt. The feedback is emotional (pride, fulfillment), social (praise, connection), and practical (improved outcomes).

This loop can break down. Unemployment, social isolation, chronic illness, or oppression can block feedback, weakening the sense of purpose. In these cases, interventions that rebuild agency—through therapy, mentoring, education, or social connection—can also restore meaning (Frankl, 1959; Steger et al., 2006).

Agency as a Path to Existential Freedom

Philosophers like Sartre and Frankl argued that humans are condemned to be free—we must create meaning in a world without inherent answers. Feedback Compatibilism offers a constructive path through this tension: we are not condemned, but **called**—to train ourselves, support others, and build systems that allow more meaningful engagement.

This model refutes the deterministic idea that meaning is an illusion, and the libertarian idea that it arises from unconstrained choice. Instead, meaning is **crafted through practice**, in contexts where effort changes outcomes and reflection leads to learning.

Communal and Cultural Dimensions of Meaning

Cultural traditions often guide people toward meaning by embedding them in communal narratives and rituals. Religious practices, storytelling, rites of passage, and moral instruction all cultivate agency through structured repetition. In these traditions, meaning arises not from self-expression alone, but from **participation in something larger**.

Psychologist Shira (Gabriel, 2017) found that people derive meaning from “collective assembly”—shared activities like worship, sports events, or protest marches that reinforce

belonging and purpose. These shared experiences provide feedback at scale, affirming one's role in a greater whole.

When Meaning Feels Elusive

Modern life often severs people from stable feedback. Gig work, social media, and algorithm-driven interaction can create hyperstimulation without deep engagement. Endless scrolling simulates action but delivers little sense of impact. Here, the solution is not escapism but **intentional re-engagement** with tasks, people, and values that yield richer feedback.

Psychologist Emily Esfahani (Smith, 2017) outlines four pillars of meaning—belonging, purpose, transcendence, and storytelling—all of which depend on the person's **capacity to act meaningfully**. That is, each requires trained agency to access and sustain.

Closing Reflections

Meaning is not handed to us—it is built. It arises from doing what matters, reflecting on the impact, and trying again. Reflect: What roles or relationships give you the deepest sense of meaning? How does your ability to act on your values shape that feeling?

The final chapter explores how agency and meaning intersect with identity—how we understand who we are, and who we can become.

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Chapter 10: Agency and the Self

Imagine Aria, a young adult reflecting on her identity as she enters a new career. She's changed majors twice, tried therapy, and journals daily to better understand herself. What emerges is not a fixed essence but a pattern—a story she is still writing. Aria's evolving identity isn't accidental; it's shaped by her active participation in feedback, learning, and personal change. **Who she is becomes clear through what she trains herself to become.**

In this final chapter, we bring together all the threads explored so far—training, responsibility, meaning—and center them in the self. Agency is not only how we act on the world; it is how we construct who we are. Our identities are neither static nor purely chosen. They are developed through intentional practice, reflection, and context.

Selfhood as a Feedback Process

Psychologists describe identity not as a fixed trait, but as a dynamic narrative that incorporates past experiences, future goals, and current feedback (McAdams, 2001). Agency is what allows this narrative to develop. Without the ability to act, reflect, and revise, identity stagnates or becomes imposed from outside.

Narrative identity grows stronger when people are encouraged to view their life story as one of **growth and self-authorship**. This is what separates a person shaped only by circumstances from one who **actively shapes themselves**.

Neuroscience and the Plastic Self

Neuroscience supports the idea that the self is malleable. Through neuroplasticity, repeated behaviors and thoughts literally rewire the brain (Schwartz & Begley, 2002). People who consistently engage in self-regulation, goal-setting, and reflective practices become neurologically more capable of future agency.

This has radical implications. It suggests that our sense of self—our beliefs, values, and emotional tendencies—are not just inherited or fated. They are trainable through repeated feedback. Agency isn't just what we do; it becomes **who we are**.

Agency Within and Beyond Determinism

Some interpretations of determinism assert that all choices are fully caused by prior states and thus **exclude any meaningful sense of agency**. From this perspective, all human behavior is reducible to biology, conditioning, or environmental input, leaving no room for responsibility, self-direction, or growth. Feedback Compatibilism directly challenges this conclusion.

While it accepts that actions arise from prior causes, it rejects the notion that **causation nullifies human authorship**. Feedback Compatibilism claims that what makes human agency special is not its independence from causality, but its **recursive structure**: our ability to use experience to reshape future behavior through reflection, planning, and practice.

In this view, agency is not an illusion, but a function of how systems—especially social and neural—**learn from and respond to feedback**. Causation doesn't eliminate freedom; it's what makes freedom **trainable and improvable**. A fully deterministic model that excludes this misses what makes agency matter: not that we are uncaused, but that we can become **self-shaping**.

This is where Feedback Compatibilism **parts ways with determinism**: it insists that within the causal chain, **emergent processes like self-regulation and learning create real capacities** that justify holding people accountable, supporting their growth, and shaping their futures.

The Role of Social Identity

Of course, identity is never formed in a vacuum. Gender, race, class, religion, and community values shape how people see themselves and what agency they are encouraged

to develop. Social identity theory shows that belonging to a group shapes self-perception, confidence, and even behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

This makes feedback loops especially powerful. When a person receives validation from their community for exercising effort, insight, or leadership, their identity expands. When they are met with dismissal or stigma, identity constricts. Systems either cultivate selves or crush them.

Agency and the Possible Self

The idea of the "possible self"—who we imagine becoming—is central to personal growth (Markus & Nurius, 1986). People with vivid, attainable possible selves are more motivated to persist, take risks, and learn. These future selves become **feedback targets**: we aim our present actions at shaping them into reality.

Feedback Compatibilism places these possible selves at the heart of freedom. To be free is to **be in training toward a self you value**, under conditions that support rather than sabotage that training.

Transformation and Redemption

Some of the most powerful identity shifts come from turning points—recovery from addiction, reconciliation after harm, or awakening to a social cause. In these moments, people redefine who they are by reengaging agency. They revise their narrative and commit to new feedback loops.

Programs in correctional facilities, addiction recovery, and community reintegration that center identity transformation—such as narrative therapy or restorative justice—are built on this model. They succeed when they **give people tools and conditions to act as someone new** (Maruna, 2001).

Philosophical Implications

Libertarian free will imagines a chooser beyond cause and context. Determinism sees identity as a byproduct of forces. Feedback Compatibilism offers a third path: **we become ourselves through patterns of training** that are open to influence but not fixed.

This doesn't mean identity is infinitely flexible—no one can become anything. But it is flexible enough to be shaped through effort, relationships, and environments that encourage growth. This is a grounded view of selfhood, one that **preserves human dignity while embracing human limitation**.

Closing Reflections

You are not the same person you were ten years ago. Nor are you simply a victim of circumstances. You are a work in progress, a feedback system shaping and shaped by the world. Reflect: What stories have defined you? Which habits reinforce your sense of self? What possible self are you training toward now?

The Feedback Compatibilist model doesn't just redefine free will. It reclaims the human journey as one of effort, reflection, and meaningful change.

References in This Chapter

- McAdams (2001), "The psychology of life stories": Explores identity as a narrative constructed over time.
- Schwartz & Begley (2002), "The Mind and the Brain": Links self-directed thought to brain plasticity.
- Tajfel & Turner (1986), "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior": Explains how group membership shapes identity and agency.

- Markus & Nurius (1986), “Possible selves”: Introduces how future-oriented identity motivates current action.
- Maruna (2001), “Making Good”: Examines identity transformation in offenders working to change their lives.

Conclusion: The Practice of Freedom

At the heart of this book is a simple but transformative idea: freedom is not a fixed trait, nor is it an illusion—it is a practice. The Feedback Compatibilist model reimagines agency as a capacity to be grown, supported, and recovered, not assumed or denied.

This view offers a fresh path through debates that have long divided philosophers and discouraged progress. Determinism's grip can feel suffocating, and libertarianism's abstractions can feel unhelpful. But between them lies the landscape of feedback: action, reflection, learning, and growth. It is here that freedom takes root—not as a defiance of cause, but as an intelligent, adaptive use of it.

Agency is not only possible—it is observable. It emerges in therapy sessions, classrooms, families, neighborhoods, and justice systems. It shows up when people learn from consequences, try again after failure, help others, or resist their worst instincts. Agency is a story we co-write with our biology, our communities, and our choices.

This book has shown that responsibility, meaning, and identity all depend on this capacity. It has also shown that accountability can be real without being cruel, and that justice can pursue safety without abandoning hope. To see people as agents is not to ignore their constraints—it is to invite their growth.

Let this model serve as a call: to teach agency, to protect and restore it, and to recognize it where others see only fate. May your own agency continue to grow through effort, feedback, and reflection—and may you become someone who helps others do the same.

A Note on Sharing

This book was written with one purpose in mind: to help people—teachers, parents, therapists, coaches, students, and anyone navigating life—grow a stronger sense of real agency, resilience, and responsibility in a world shaped by causes and constraints.

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If this book helps you or someone you care about build even a little more self-direction, reflection, or hope, then it has done exactly what it was meant to do. Pass it on. Use it. Improve upon it.

The canvas is yours to paint.

— Glenn Burgos:

About the Author

Glenn Burgos developed the ideas in this book after becoming convinced of the deterministic nature of the universe — while remaining equally convinced that real agency exists and matters deeply.

The tension between these two truths led him to examine why so many arguments against their compatibility felt flawed. That exploration gave rise to Feedback Compatibilism: the view that agency is a trainable talent — the single most important tool we possess.

Agency is what makes life meaningful. Understanding how it works, and how we can strengthen it, is the central purpose of this book.

He would be glad to hear from readers who find the ideas useful.

You can reach him at: glenn.burgos@proton.me

Conceptual Overview and Methods Note

This appendix provides a concise summary of the conceptual framework behind Feedback Compatibilism and situates it in relation to other major views on free will and moral responsibility. It also clarifies the approach used in constructing the book's examples, citations, and structure.

1. Feedback Compatibilism at a Glance

Feature	Feedback Compatibilism
View of agency	Trainable talent, shaped by effort and environment
Relation to causality	Embraces causality but emphasizes recursive, adaptive systems
Freedom defined as	Capacity to engage in feedback-driven growth
Responsibility grounded in	Degree of agency at time of action
Implication for justice	Justification of responses based on safety and growth
Distinctive claim	Agency is both real and improvable within a causal system

2. Comparison with Other Theories

Theory	View of Agency	Stance on Responsibility	Key Weakness Addressed by Feedback Compatibilism
Determinism	Illusory	Undermined by causality	Restores responsibility via trainable agency
Libertarianism	Uncaused and free	Assumes radical autonomy	Replaces metaphysical freedom with measurable growth
Traditional Compatibilism	Acting in line with desires	Permits basic responsibility	Adds depth: focuses on how agency is formed, not just assumed

3. Methodological Notes

- **Empirical grounding**: Real-world examples and references are drawn from peer-reviewed psychological, neuroscientific, and criminological studies. Each chapter includes references used once per example and listed in order of appearance, to aid clarity and accessibility.
- **Examples**: The characters and cases (e.g., Elena, Maria, Tasha) are composites based on plausible scenarios, not actual individuals. They were designed to illustrate variations in agency across different life contexts.

- **Cultural framing**: Care has been taken to reference a range of cultural, historical, and systemic influences on agency, including collectivist and restorative traditions. These are not treated as exotic alternatives, but as parallel feedback systems.
- **Language choices**: Key terms like “agency,” “feedback loop,” and “accountability” are used consistently across chapters. When technical terms appear (e.g., scaffolding, locus of control), they are explained or simplified to remain accessible to general readers.

4. A Note on Scope

This book is not a comprehensive survey of the free will debate, nor does it seek to resolve every philosophical tension within metaphysics. Rather, it proposes a **pragmatic model** for understanding human freedom as a **skill that can be cultivated**, and offers a vocabulary for moral and policy conversations that move beyond blame or determinism.